

Reading the Aesthetics of Picture Postcards
An Argument for their Use in Historical Study

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PICTURE POSTCARDS HAVE A SPECIAL PLACE in American culture. In 1873, the United States first issued postal cards—cards offering a 5 1/8-inch by 3-inch space for a written note and prestamped for user convenience. (Private business cards mailed in the North German Confederation and the United States in the 1860s were the first postcards.) Twenty years later, the first American picture postcards were printed on government postal cards as souvenirs of the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Picture postcards soon captured the fancy of collectors, who began collecting examples in the same decade. By 1900 collecting in Western Europe, Britain, and the United States reached the level of a craze, pushed partly by their common use until the 1910s as a substitute for letters and partly by the British publisher Tuck, which awarded prizes to the collector who gathered the largest number. Thereafter fewer people collected picture postcards but they also grew more discriminating, distinguishing among the companies that published the picture postcards, the various techniques of finishing (for example, the black-and-white photograph on card stock termed “real-photo card” and the “linen”), and most commonly the picture’s subject. In 1944 hobbyists coined the name “deltiology,” from the Greek “*deltos*” for “writing tablet,” for their pursuit, but it gained little currency with the general public, which still refers to them as postcard collectors.¹

Among historians, picture postcards have failed to achieve much value. As material culture artifacts, they seem too recent and plentiful to benefit from the scarcity and age that, for example, rendered coins a significant archaeological resource. As verbal documents, they seem trivial. Their senders’ handwritten

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messages are highly personal, unreflective of broader issues (typically, “Wish you were here”), and their printed messages (typically, “Greetings from vacationland . . .”) are dismissible as advertising hyperbole. Finally, they have been but one victim of the chasm between elite and popular culture. Picture postcard researchers themselves have occasionally slighted their subject because postcards, with their preprinted messages and small space for the sender’s written note, discourage lengthy analysis.²

This paper aims to demonstrate the value of the picture postcard’s least understood aspect—the subjective factors of mood and feeling in iconography—by analyzing a group of picture postcards of Old Orchard Beach, Maine. One of the places most “postcarded” in number of different views, the relatively small area of the seven-mile shore along the Atlantic Ocean (between the Saco and Scarborough rivers about fifteen miles south of Portland), Old Orchard Beach offers a desirable test case. This discussion is based on the approximately 2,200 different views appearing on postcards in my own collection, that of the Old Orchard Beach School Department, and Robert Domingue’s history of Old Orchard Beach in postcards (see note 3).

Although picture postcards of Old Orchard Beach continue to be produced in great volume, this paper will deal with those published from the 1900s through the 1930s when the volume of different views reached its zenith. Manufacturers headquartered in Boston (Mason Brothers and Company, Reichner Brothers, and Tichnor Brothers) and Portland, Maine (the Hugh C. Leighton Company and the Atlantic Post Card Company) produced most of the examples, although some smaller and some unidentifiable businesses also contributed. In the manner of art history, the interpretations are based on the picture postcards themselves. The author has located neither explanations for the manufacturers’ aesthetics nor the number of each view manufactured. A Midwestern manufacturer with large press runs, however, is known later to have produced between 6,500 and 20,000 of each view it printed. For the sake of simplicity, from this point through to the paper’s end, “postcard” will mean the type of picture postcard incorporating a photograph—“retouched” through the selection of features and addition of color.³

Postcards and Scholarship

Scholarship dealing with postcards has evolved sporadically. Research has traced the postcard’s advent and relied on postcards for, as one historian termed it, a “literal portrait” of the subject studied, providing facts such as what a building looked like and what businesses operated in it.⁴ Yet further questions may be asked about how and why postcards customarily depict objects as they do. Using

postcards as a source of names and dates can be an intellectual dead end, but their subjective values, when these can be determined, offer a rich storehouse of cultural meanings likely to engender lively exchange. One historian rejected the postcard as the “art of fakery,” knowing the considerable extent to which the photographs underlying them were retouched. It is now axiomatic that all photographs, not just those on which postcards are based, reveal the photographer’s perspective rather than records of material fact.⁵ What is omitted on the margins outside the image as well as what is included within the photograph’s frame reflects the creator’s selectivity. It is indeed curious that historians, often ardent humanists, have been satisfied to pick through the details of a “literal portrait” like scientists in search of facts and not been intrigued as well about their aesthetics.

Themes in Old Orchard Beach Postcards

A brief history of the cultural themes that converge in Old Orchard Beach postcards is necessary before addressing how those themes are expressed aesthetically in the postcards. Three agents help define the American quest for improvement: man, nature, and technology. America, although it may not be exceptional in this, has been settled by people seeking departures from the past. Novelty is structured into most Americans’ consciousness, but along with it comes a yearning for reassurance. Given this ambivalent frame of mind, technology has been perceived as both liberating and diminishing—on the one hand saving labor while increasing productivity and on the other hand disrupting established social relationships.⁶ Nature is perceived as a passive stage that technology acts upon, while mankind is the beneficiary, usually exercising dominion over both technology and nature (although nature and technology occasionally seem to have gotten out of control).

Technology’s mediation between man and nature in the quest for improvement is a central theme of the Old Orchard Beach postcards. Historian Leo Marx defined pastoralism as the balance among those three elements that Americans coveted in their nostalgia for rural life. He also traced its American origins to the early-nineteenth century, and, in familiarizing historians with pastoralism, penned a memorable metaphor, “the machine in the garden,” to describe the American fear of technology’s disruptive potential. In Marx’s discussion of the nineteenth century, he showed how that century’s most widely influential new technology, the railroad, aroused “a sense of dislocation, conflict, and anxiety.” The railroad’s reception, in fact, was typical of that accorded most technologies in America. Visual images of the idealized American landscape captured a

bucolic essence with little place for technology—"a quiet land of forests, villages, and farms dedicated to the pursuit of happiness."⁷

Old Orchard Beach as Pastoral Retreat

Many locations across America have emerged as mythic in the works of artists and writers alike. In the late-nineteenth century, however, Old Orchard Beach emerged as a prime candidate for portrayal as a pastoral retreat. As early as the seventeenth century the first white settlers had found the beach a welcome contrast with Maine's generally rocky coast and, after the Civil War, Old Orchard Beach developed rapidly as one of the nation's first popular resorts. In 1873, the Boston and Maine Railroad built a station within 100 yards of the shore, and the town soon teemed with summer visitors to hotels, boarding houses, restaurants, a pier, a horse racing track, an auto racing track, airplane rides, a casino, an amusement park, movie houses and theaters.⁸

The photographers who made the images on which the postcards were based chose to depict a landscape from which they seemed emotionally detached. Cameras were almost always focused on a wide field of view and often in views up and down the beach from aerial vantage points. The effect is cool, like sociological observation. Objects—man, technology, and nature—seem rationally ordered. Tranquillity is imparted as if some benevolent observer is gazing upon the vistas. The horizon in most postcards strikes the images' midsections, producing a literal balance between earth and sky, a preference for calmness subtly made. Life seems capable of being taken for granted; embrace, not scrutiny, is the viewer's likely reflex. Convention persuaded photographers not to tip their cameras up or down but to maintain a photographic plane perpendicular to the ground, thus placing the horizon midway in the view.⁹ Nothing in the postcards was viewed close up to suggest a message about an individual object or person. The reporting photographers invite the viewer into the scene rather than force it upon the viewer. No puzzles are suggested; features are sharply defined, regardless of their distance from the viewer, as they are in the mind's eye of the trusting observer. The large-format cameras with which those images doubtless were made were not the only cameras available. Hence, the perspective resulting was a choice and not a technological inevitability. The postcard photographer's stilled landscape became perhaps the single most important characteristic of the Old Orchard Beach views as their voluminous reproduction made them available for mass consumption.

On the whole, the views seem harmonious, but how do the agents in the American quest for improvement—man, technology, and nature—relate to each other to compose the satisfying assemblage? Each seems to share equally, if not

in proportion to the space occupied, then in conventional stances. Nature is omnipresent and is always the stage upon which man and machine interact. A passenger train arriving at the station, for example, seems gently coming to rest at the postcard's bottom edge. From the bird's-eye view, green fields and forests draw the viewer's attention to the horizon delineated firmly against a sky of puffy, cumulus clouds. A trolley rocking to and fro on its tracks at lawn's edge in transit through a residential street is pushed to small scale at midground in another view. Irony reinforces the trolley's subordination with a rare caption: "Am Having An Excitable Time In Old Orchard Watching the Cars Passing By." One view is rare because the sky, beach, and ocean occupy almost all of it, while a few people, two vehicles on the beach, and some of the hotels are situated on the margin. Two of the postcards sighted eastward, down the town's main street, show its business center, a church, and residences, but the corridor terminates in a small blue patch at the horizon. The sea punctuates, there, a visual and figurative terminus. One of those postcards illustrating the commercial main street is also among those most often available for sale, perhaps indicative of its considerable popularity. A view westward along the same street directs the viewer's eye toward the horizon, where an apparent building interrupts a line of trees. Might the fact that few of this scene survive suggest that it was less pleasing than the previous view, which is more inclusive of nature?

Entirely sun-filled daylight scenes far outnumber nighttime scenes and reveal objects almost as clearly as they would be seen in daylight. Night afforded none of the anonymity customarily associated with it. Electric light, a relatively new technology opening the night for active adult enjoyment when the postcards first appeared, did not illuminate the views. Strings of electric lights outlined buildings and concourses that would have been visible in the moonlit views anyway. For nighttime stagings in the postcards, reliance on the full moon is a strong statement for nature as the determinant throughout the postcard views. The resulting imbalance of the three factors harmonized elsewhere nonetheless imparts a natural feeling, nothing extraordinary; idealization again precludes analysis. The virtual absence of shadows, which if unretouched photographs were used for the postcards would register in stark contrast throughout strongly lighted scenes, creates no alarm, as if the photographer and viewer tacitly agree to this trick on nature. In fact, until the 1930s and 1940s, night scenes in postcards were produced from photographs made in the day. The effects of the postcards of night scenes under consideration here are consequences of the period's photographic film, which could not easily document night scenes.¹⁰

Technology is omnipresent in the scenes but always in service. The horse and buggy, a combination of one of nature's animals and a man-made vehicle, are seldom depicted, the photographers eagerly overemphasizing automobiles in the earliest views when automobiles were still novel. The automobile's acceptance

in life increased throughout the twentieth century, and its increasingly unquestioned status is correspondingly reflected in the numerous places it occupied in the postcards: traveling on streets paved and unpaved, parked randomly or in parallel. Automobile races on the beach are shown, but their collective thrust is outweighed by showing the racecars in the foreground in restraint at the starting line or as barely discernible specks in the distance with plenty of spectators, sand, and sky. An obedient mechanical servant, the automobile is not the disruptive force threatening the pastoral settings that Leo Marx identified as the habitual lot of machines in the metaphoric garden.

Technology is also represented in the twenty-five-acre amusement park that occupied the area at the entrance to the pier at Old Orchard Beach. Views of this amusement park are numerous. Its centrality to Old Orchard Beach as a leisure destination provided an obvious practical explanation of its regular appearance in the postcards, but the multiplicity of vantage points from which the photographs were made suggests an unquenchable fascination stemming from the amusement park's open display of technology. Beside game booths and refreshment stands, there towered a three-story roller coaster, a contraption rigged of chain links and motors pulling open cars along a small railroad track undulating along a course atop a wooden scaffold. Here is a showcase for man's faith in machines, either heedless of their risks or believing they were safely managed. The postcards of that overpowering constellation, known as the "amusement center,"¹¹ hint at the grip it held on contemporaries—technology harnessed for pleasure.

"Man at play" can be understood as the dominant tableaux of those postcards. Nature and technology conformed to human needs. But it is as silhouettes against the panorama, not as individuals thrust forward in relief, that people are represented. Man is comfortable, harmonized with his surroundings. Men, women, and children are distinguishable by clothing and stature, but the postcards do not reveal memorable glimpses of individuals. Visible differences known to exist between the working class and middle class at Old Orchard Beach are absent in postcard portrayals. Despite the racial, ethnic, class, and gender divisions arising most notably within the eastern urban centers at the turn of the nineteenth century, none seemed to beset Old Orchard Beach, one of the period's first recreational destinations for the residents of metropolitan Boston.¹²

Images from different vantage points repeating the theme of carefree abandon barrage postcard viewers. Words were seldom employed on the obverse of the postcards to reiterate a point. Words would have seemed superfluous. Unwilling to lapse altogether into soporific satisfaction, however, the creators of one card dating from about 1915 asked the rhetorical question: "Gee, but aint [sic] money slippery at Old Orchard Beach, Me.?" People enjoying themselves take no heed of cost and yet, if they mention cost, are aware of their self-deception. Old

Orchard Beach looked like the very incarnation of pleasure itself—all the elements of nature, technology, and man in perfect union.

Conclusion

Most historians interested in postcards have been guided by a scientific paradigm, looking for “hard” data relevant to highly specialized studies. Mood and feeling aroused by the visual sense nonetheless confirm intuitively what people believe right, now and in the past. Postcards encode those past intuitions that inform culture.

Early-twentieth-century postcards of Old Orchard Beach, Maine, for example, illustrate the artistic conventions of pastoralism through which Americans retreated (since the late-nineteenth century) from the complexities of urbanization, industrialization, and gender, social class, racial, and ethnic divisions. Those postcards encouraged viewers to feel soothed by a utopian vision—technology harnessed for human pleasure on a sunlit stage of land, sky, and water. Other beaches with amusement parks proliferated at the turn of the twentieth century. Atlantic City was foremost and drew its doting postcard photographers, publishers, and consumers. But no greater number of different images for so comparatively small a place of play appears to have gushed forth beginning at the turn of the twentieth century and continuing for several decades, than for Old Orchard Beach. Its portrayals, thus, have become some of the most memorable images in America’s collective consciousness, a worthy popular culture supplement to the pastoral metaphors heretofore drawn largely from elite art and literature. They can prompt exploration of other postcards by historians seeking insight into the totality of human experience through its humanistic as well as its scientific sensibilities.

Notes

¹ George and Dorothy Miller, *Picture Postcards in the United States 1893–1914* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1976), p. 1; Frank Staff, *The Picture Postcard and Its Origins* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), pp. 45–47, 49; Donald R. Brown, “The Institute of American Deltiology: An Emerging Resource,” in Norman D. Stevens, ed., *Postcards in the Library: Invaluable Visual Resources* (New York: Haworth Press, 1995), pp. 20–21.

² Richard Carline, *Pictures in the Post: The Story of the Picture Postcard and Its Place in the History of Popular Art* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1971), p. 62. For a discussion of the split between elite and popular culture, see Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) and Jim Cullen, *The Art of Democracy: A Concise History of Popular Culture in the United States* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996), pp. 92–95.

³ Robert Domingue, *Greetings from Old Orchard Beach, Me.: A Picture Postcard History* (Wilmington, Mass.: Hampshire Press, 1986), pp. 1, 9; Katherine Hamilton-Smith (curator, Curt Teich Postcard Collection), letter to author, 12 March 1998; Moira F. Harris, "Curt Teich Postcards in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* 54 (1994): 309.

⁴ Harris, p. 309, used the term "literal portrait." To sample studies that put postcards to good use, see Brooke Baldwin, "On the Verso: Postcard Messages as a Key to Popular Prejudices," *Journal of Popular Culture* vol. 22, no. 3 (1988): 15–28 and H. Roger Grant, *Railroad Postcards in the Age of Steam* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994).

⁵ John W. Ripley, "The Art of Postcard Fakery," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly* 38 (1972): 129. Photography's inherent subjectivity, especially as it relates to tourism, is explained well in Patricia C. Albers and William R. James, "Travel Photography: A Methodological Approach," *Annals of Tourism Research* 15 (1988): 134–44.

⁶ Alan Trachtenberg, "Introduction," in Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Democratic Vistas 1860–1880* (New York: George Braziller, 1970), p. 13.

⁷ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 6, 16. Also see: Sarah Burns, *Pastoral Inventions: Rural Life in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

⁸ Marx, p. 24; Domingue, p. 5; "From the Old Orchard to the Steel Pier," *Old Orchard Beach Times*, 25 May 1983; "The Century Turns, the City Burns," *Old Orchard Beach Times*, 8 June 1982; "After the Great Fire, the Scene Was Set for a New Era at Old Orchard," *Old Orchard Beach Times*, 22 June 1983; "The Golden Age of Aviation Comes to OOB," *Old Orchard Beach Times*, 6 July 1983; "The Band Age Beats Back the Blues[;] Depression Leaves Old Orchard Unscathed," *Old Orchard Beach Times*, 20 July 1983.

⁹ Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present* (New York: Little Brown and Co., 1982), p. 199.

¹⁰ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 6–9; Ripley, p. 131; Miller and Miller, p. 146.

¹¹ Domingue, p. 32.

¹² Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), p. 176; Trachtenberg, "Introduction," pp. 1–32; Neil Harris, "Introduction," in Neil Harris, ed., *The Land of Contrasts 1880–1901* (New York: Braziller, 1970), pp. 18–23.